

Impressionism in Selected Works for Flute

An Honors Thesis (MUSPE 498)

by

Jennifer L. Zent

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Julia Larson

Julia Larson

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

The following paper discusses how impressionism influenced composers at the turn of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by flute compositions of the period. The works discussed are: Fantasie, Op. 79 (1898) by Gabriel Fauré; Pièce en forme de Habanera (1907) by Maurice Ravel; Madrigal (1908) by Philippe Gaubert; Syrinx (1913) by Claude Debussy; Poem for Flute and Orchestra (1918) by Charles Griffes; Danse de la chèvre (1919) by Arthur Honegger; and Sonata for Flute and Piano (1956) by Francis Poulenc. This creative project also involved a public recital of these works, for which program notes were prepared; a copy of the program and a recording of the recital are included.

French music at the end of the nineteenth century featured several contrasting styles. One school, led by César Franck and his student Vincent d'Indy, emphasized the use of classical forms and regular thematic development, within a romantic harmonic framework. Another important movement was the French style, whose main composers were Camille Saint-Saëns and his student Gabriel Fauré. Their music was characterized by the classical ideas of order, balance, and restraint. "It was subtle, not dramatic, quiet, and full of nuances."¹ But perhaps the most revolutionary ideas came from Claude Debussy and his new musical movement called impressionism. This style was influenced by a type of French art and poetry which captured impressions that a subject made, rather than strict representations. Although impressionism in music was relatively short-lived, this style influenced many composers, as demonstrated by those works for flute which are the subject of this paper.

Impressionism originated with a group of French artists whose unique style of painting influenced all of the arts and literature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group, known as *Société Anonyme des Artistes, Peintres, Sculpteurs, et Graveurs*, developed during the

¹Paula Plutschak, Background Information for the 1988 William Montgomery Flute Masterclass: French Impressionism and Music for Unaccompanied Flute (Unpublished Senior Thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 1988), 1.

years of 1874-1877.² One of its most influential members was Claude Monet. In 1874, Monet's *Impression: soleil levant* prompted art critic Louis Leroy to write a mocking article which described Monet and other artists as *impressionistes*. These artists included Manet, Cézanne, Degas, Pissarro, Boudin, Sisley, Morisot, and Renoir.³ Following publication of Leroy's article, the *Société's* members began to call themselves impressionists, a descriptive term which is still used today. The work of these artists was unique because it represented an impression that the subject made on the artist, instead of capturing the exact image of a subject. For example, an impressionist would portray images through the use of light and color, avoiding sharp outlines. According to musicologist Ronald Pen, ". . . impressionist art implied more than it actually stated."⁴

The first major showing of impressionist art took place in Paris at the Great Exhibition of 1900, which was attended by people from all over the world. Due to the exhibition's overwhelming response, these artists received recognition for their new style and began to inspire others with their impressionist ideas. Among the first to be influenced was the symbolist poet

²Martin Cooper, French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 33.

³Arnold Whittall, "Impressionism," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 20 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980, IX), 30.

⁴Ronald Pen, Introduction to Music (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992), 257.

Stéphane Mallarmé. His poems contain literary elements which are similar to those of impressionist art. For example, Mallarmé uses the impressionist technique of representing reality by suggesting ideas rather than stating them: his poetry is abstract. This technique is defined by author Charles Mauron. "In literature, as in music or in painting, . . . what the artist does not expressly state, but hints, insinuates, suggests--that is what creates alike depth and distance."⁵ Impressionism also began to influence music, as composers soon found ways of transferring these ideas from light to sound.⁶

Impressionism in music was first anticipated by Alexis Chabrier, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner. Their compositions emphasized tone color and dynamics, and they experimented with chromaticism and harmonies other than those found in the traditional major-minor system. The use of these ideas foreshadowed the impressionist movement in music that began with Claude Debussy's Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune, based on the poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. This piece was originally intended as a triptych which would include the Prélude, Interlude, and Paraphrase finale; however, Debussy never finished the last two movements in time for the premiere of the piece on December 22, 1894. Debussy's musical score consisted of subtle orchestration, which included two harps, strings, and winds. No bright brasses

⁵Charles Mauron, Stéphane Mallarmé Poems (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), 8.

⁶Rollo Meyers, Modern French Music from Fauré to Boulez (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 63.

were used, and the only percussion instruments employed were antique cymbals. The piece opened with a sensual flute solo, which emphasized the instrument's low register and was played by the French flutist Georges Barrère.

Debussy's inspiration came directly from the paintings of the French artists and the poetry of Mallarmé. Their impressionist style suggested to him new compositional techniques which implied rather than stated, and stressed color and texture rather than dynamic development.⁷ Debussy's style abandoned traditional musical ideas such as sonata, exposition, development, prepared cadences, formal periods, and thematic material. Musicologist Rollo Meyers describes the application of impressionist techniques to music as follows: "Just as the painters 'decomposed' a ray of light, so did the musicians split up the 'fundamental' of a chord into its component parts."⁸

While Debussy is considered the founder and primary composer of the impressionist style in music, he despised this label and denied his role in the movement. He once wrote to his publisher, 'What I am trying to do. . . is to create a kind of reality--what these imbeciles call "Impressionism"'.⁹ Despite his feelings, Debussy's works continued to be termed impressionistic, and his style was beginning to influence other composers at the turn of the century.

⁷Harvard Dictionary of Music, ed. Willi Apel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966), 350.

⁸Meyers, op. cit., 63.

⁹Meyers, op. cit., 62.

Although it is difficult to define impressionism in music, certain elements are typically found. For example, the composition must be subjective, with abstract qualities and a certain vagueness. A composer can represent these ideas in a variety of ways, such as emphasizing an individual instrument's timbre and dynamic ranges. This technique is similar to an artist representing a subject through the use of light, color, and blurred images. Other impressionist ideas include avoiding direction of the melodic lines by using irregular and incomplete phrases, and abandoning traditional formal construction altogether. Tonal progressions may be blurred by unresolved dissonances and the use of exotic scales such as pentatonic and whole-tone scales, which display the influence of non-western harmonies. Other compositional elements found in impressionist music include: frequent use of the interval of a tritone, parallel-motion chords, augmented triads, triads with added seconds, fourths, sixths, and sevenths, as well as avoidance of the leading tone. A piece which exhibits these musical elements may be categorized as impressionistic because of the overall mood implied; however, not all of these elements must be present for a work to be considered in this style. Accordingly, the works for flute discussed in the following paragraphs may be considered impressionistic.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) combines elements of late romanticism with impressionism to create his own musical style. A student of Camille Saint-Saëns, Fauré was the creator of the French *mélodie* or solo song. He was especially gifted in the area of harmony and tonality. Fauré's Fantasie, Op. 79 is a good example of his harmonic style. In this piece, written for the 1898 Paris

Conservatory *concours*, Fauré uses unresolved dissonances and frequent modulations. This work also exhibits the impressionist element of emphasizing tone color; Fauré uses the flute's low register to add richness to the harmonic development. As an early composer in the impressionist movement, Fauré's personal style influenced many twentieth-century composers, including his pupil Maurice Ravel (1875-1937).

During his student years, Ravel composed a piano duet with Spanish influences which later became the orchestral work Rapsodie Espagnole (1907). Although Ravel wrote no solo flute works, he transcribed the third movement of Rapsodie Espagnole for flute and guitar (or harp) to create Pièce en forme de Habanera. This work displays several impressionist ideas. Like Fauré, Ravel emphasized the tone color of the flute's low register. Since a habanera is a type of Cuban dance similar in style to the tango, the flute's low register adds to the sensuality that the dance portrays. Repeated use of augmented triads is an additional impressionist device which appears in the work.

Philippe Gaubert (1879-1941) was another composer influenced by the impressionist movement. Madrigal (1908) is representative of his style and is an example of a character piece. This work is in ternary form and its middle section features flute and piano lines which move in parallel motion--an impressionist device. Gaubert also uses the full range of the flute to emphasize its variety of tone colors. The influence of the *bel canto* vocal tradition was important to Gaubert, and is demonstrated in this work by the use of modal

harmonies and rhythms which are reminiscent of the vocal madrigal.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918), founder of the impressionist movement in music, displays these ideas well in his composition Syrinx. Debussy wrote this work for unaccompanied flute in 1913; however, it was not published until 1927. It was originally entitled La Flute de Pan (The Flute of Pan). One version of the piece's origin is that it was written as incidental music to Gabriel Mourey's play Psyche, to be performed just before the death of Pan. The flutist was Louis Fleury, to whom the piece is dedicated. Another story is explained by Helmut Serafin. He agrees that Syrinx was written for the play, but for the opening of the third act. In this scene, the nymphs are relaxing and enjoying the night air. At times, they pause and listen to the invisible Pan playing his panpipes. This is a better explanation, since the death scene does not allow a place for music, and the sensual nature of Syrinx is more appropriate for the opening scene of the third act. Flutist Marcel Moyse explains yet another version of the origin. He states that Debussy was asked to write some music at a party. The inspiration for Syrinx came from a little statue of a shepherd playing a pipe. Debussy quickly wrote the manuscript at the piano, and later that evening Moyse gave the first performance.¹⁰

Syrinx is an excellent example of impressionism. First, it is programmatic, based on a story about the mythical god Pan who fell in love with

¹⁰Julia Ann Larson, Flute Without Accompaniment: Works from Debussy: "Syrinx" (1913) to Varèse: "Density 21.5" (1936) (Unpublished D.M.A. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 1990, UMI #9121464), 3.

Syrinx, a beautiful nymph. When she did not return his love, Pan chased her into the river. The goddess Diana came to her rescue and transformed her into a reed, from which Pan created the first flute. Another impressionist technique found in Syrinx is the use of non-traditional scales. For example, the work begins with a descending whole-tone scale; this motive appears repeatedly throughout the piece. Debussy also utilizes pentatonic scales and the interval of a tritone, displaying his fascination with non-western music. Syrinx emphasizes the timbre of the flute's low register, and the sudden dynamic contrasts add many subtle nuances. All of these elements combine to create an overall mood which is vague and sensuous.

The impressionist movement in music was mainly restricted to French composers; however, the American Charles Griffes (1884-1920) was an exception. Griffes' last major composition was Poem for Flute and Orchestra, written in 1918 and premiered on November 16, 1919 by Georges Barrère and the New York Symphony Orchestra. The influence of impressionism is evident in Poem. For example, Griffes uses pentatonic scales and augmented triads throughout the work. He also emphasizes the flute's many tone colors, displaying the entire range of the instrument. The accompaniment uses parallel-motion chords and tremolos to produce vagueness. According to musicologist Theodore Baker, Griffes is the "foremost American composer in the impressionist genre"¹¹ because of his utilization of these techniques.

¹¹Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, seventh ed., rev. Nicholas Slonimsky (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 892.

Another important unaccompanied flute composition is Danse de la chèvre (Dance of the goat). This piece was written by Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) in 1919 and premiered in May of the same year by the French flutist René Le Roy. Honegger was a member of a group of young French composers called *Les Six*, all of whom were influenced by Erik Satie. Although Satie himself was not an advocate of impressionism, the movement was at its peak during this time, and impressionistic influences can be found in the music of these composers, including Honegger.

Danse de la chèvre is programmatic, telling the story of a goat who is asleep when the piece begins, but soon awakens and begins a spirited dance. He tires from his energetic dancing and starts to fall asleep again, but something awakens him and he dances even more vigorously than before. His dancing soon exhausts him and he once again resumes his sleeping as the piece ends. The piece is not in strict ternary form, but does begin and end with the same theme, which symbolizes the sleeping goat. This theme emphasizes the tritone, an important interval in impressionistic music. As with the other composers discussed, Honegger also utilizes the timbre of the flute's low register. Although Honegger does not use as many impressionist elements in his music, the influence of Debussy's style is apparent.

As with Honegger, Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was also a member of *Les Six*. His compositions progressed towards a neo-classic style; however, the impressionist influence is evident in his music. An example is the second movement from his Sonata for Flute and Piano entitled Cantilena, which is a

lyrical vocal melody. This movement is similar in style to Gaubert's Madrigal. Both composers were influenced by the *bel canto* vocal tradition, as displayed through their compositions' expressive lyricism. Poulenc uses impressionist elements such as avoidance of the melodic line, irregular construction of phrases, dynamic emphasis, parallel-motion chords, and unresolved dissonances. Poulenc composed Sonata in 1956; it is his only work for flute and piano. Sonata was premiered by Poulenc and flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal at the Strasbourg Festival in 1957. As with all of the preceding works discussed, it is a standard in the flute repertoire and exhibits musical elements typical of the impressionist movement.

Impressionism not only influenced late nineteenth-century composers, but also had a lasting effect on music throughout the twentieth century. Although the scope of this paper is limited to flute compositions, many other works were also written in the impressionist style for various combinations of instruments. The impressionist period in music lasted only from approximately 1892-1918 and its characteristics were mainly exhibited by the compositions of Debussy; however, its influence extended to many other composers, and it helped to smooth the transition into twentieth-century music.

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**BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS
SCHOOL OF MUSIC**

JENNIFER ZENT
flute
in a
SENIOR HONORS RECITAL
assisted by

Michael Karpowicz, piano - Daniel Garcia, guitar

**Fantasie, Op. 79 Gabriel Fauré
(1845-1924)**

Fantasie, Op. 79 was written in 1898 for the Paris Conservatory concours. It follows the typical format of a concours piece, with a slow introduction to demonstrate the performer's tone and musicianship, followed by a fast section which displays rapid technique and facile articulation. The frequent modulations found in this piece are typical of Fauré's harmonic style.

**Syrinx Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)**

Debussy wrote *Syrinx* in 1913 as incidental music to Gabriel Mourey's play *Psyche*. It was premiered in the same year by Louis Fleury, to whom the piece is dedicated. Debussy's use of whole tone and pentatonic scales in *Syrinx* demonstrates its impressionistic qualities. The piece is based on a story about the mythical god Pan who fell in love with Syrinx, a beautiful nymph. When she did not return his love, Pan chased her into the river. The goddess Diana came to her rescue and transformed her into a reed, from which Pan created the first flute.

**Danse de la chèvre Arthur Honegger
(1892-1955)**

Arthur Honegger wrote *Danse de la chèvre* (*Dance of the Goat*) in 1919. It was premiered in May of the same year by René LeRoy. The piece is programmatic, telling the story of a goat who is asleep when the piece begins, but soon awakens and begins a spirited dance. He tires from his energetic dancing and starts to fall asleep again, but something awakens him and he dances even more vigorously than before. His dancing soon exhausts him and he once again resumes his sleeping as the piece ends.

**Poem Charles T. Griffes
(1884-1920)**

Poem for Flute and Orchestra, Griffes' last major composition, was written in 1918. Georges Barrère debuted the piece on November 16, 1919, with the New York Symphony Orchestra. Griffes' use of pentatonic scales and his emphasis on tone colors establish this piece as typical of the impressionistic period. The piece begins with a lyric theme that is followed by several changes in style and mood, finally concluding with the opening theme. This piece is musically and technically challenging, and is a standard in the flute repertoire.

. . . Intermission . . .

**Pièce en forme de Habanera Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)**

As a student, Ravel composed a piano duet with Spanish influences which later became the orchestral work *Rapsodie Espagnole* (1907). *Pièce en forme de Habanera* is transcribed from the third movement of *Rapsodie Espagnole*. A habanera is a type of Cuban dance with slow to moderate tempo, similar in style to the tango.

Madrigal Philippe Gaubert
(1879-1941)

Madrigal was composed in 1908. It is an example of a character piece, in ternary form. The influence of the *bel canto* vocal tradition was important to Gaubert, and is demonstrated in this work by the use of modal harmonies and rhythms which are reminiscent of the vocal madrigal.

Sonata for Flute and Piano Francis Poulenc
Allegro malinconico (1899-1963)
Cantilena
Presto giocoso

Poulenc wrote *Sonata for Flute and Piano* in 1956. It was premiered by Jean-Pierre Rampal and Poulenc at the Strasbourg Festival in 1957. The piece consists of three contrasting movements in a neo-classic style. The first movement, in ternary form, has themes which display rhythmic vitality. The second movement displays lyricism typical of the French style. This movement is one of the most expressive musical examples ever written for the flute. The third movement is very rhythmic in both the flute and the piano. Poulenc's *Sonata* is a standard piece in the flute repertoire.

Jennifer Zent is a student of Julia Larson
and is a member of Sigma Alpha Iota,
International Academic Fraternity for women in the field of music,
and Pi Kappa Lambda, National Honor Society in Music.

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